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ABSTRACT

Most of the industrialized world retains an obsolete, tracked, multitiered public education system that prepares some children for university and others for blue-collar jobs. This educational design neglects changes in technology, family structure, and community life, and its bureaucratized management values uniformity and process over initiative and results. Education in the United States lacks clear standards, sound assessments, and effective accountability mechanisms. Various reform efforts over the last 13 years have been generally unproductive. The 1990s, however, seem more receptive to a different paradigm of school reform--reinventing public education. A reinvented public-education system would welcome diverse strategies and dissimilar schools organized and run by teacher cooperatives, parent associations, private corporations, community-based organizations, and religious institutions. Students and families would choose the schools best suited to them in a system that requires little bureaucracy and few regulations. The new "reinvention" paradigm of school reform is not incrementalist, top-down, or uniform. The new paradigm welcomes decentralized control, entrepreneurial management, and grass-roots initiatives, within a framework of publicly defined standards and accountability. (LMI)

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By Chester E. Finn Jr.

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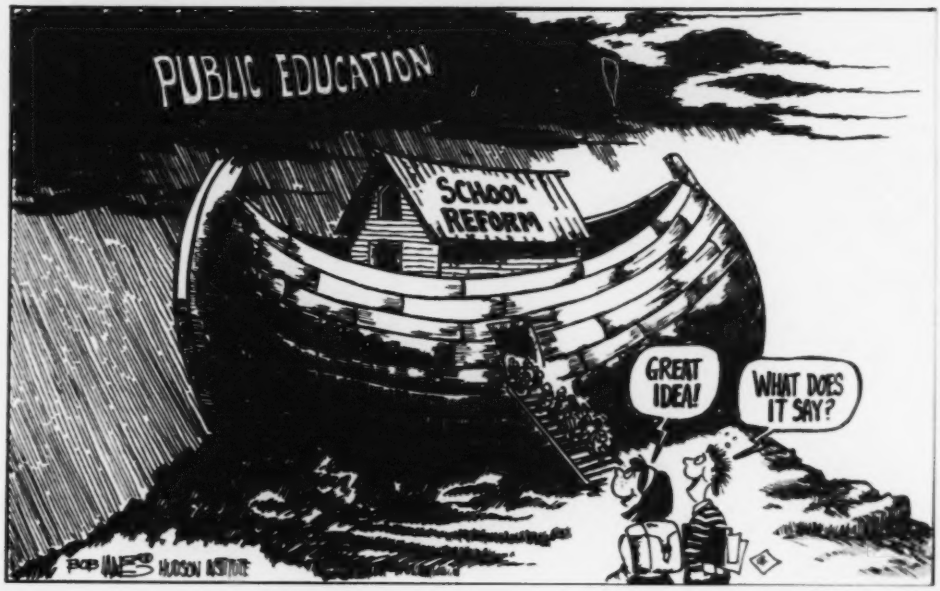
Different Schools for a Better Future

By Chester E. Finn Jr.

- *Most of the industrialized world retains an obsolete, tracked, multi-tiered public education system that prepares some children for university and others for blue-collar jobs. This nineteenth-century design pays little attention to changes in technology and the changing structure of family and community life, and its bureaucratized management values uniformity and process over initiative and results. Education in the U.S. lacks clear standards, sound assessments, and effective accountability mechanisms.*

- *Thirteen years since the U.S. was declared a nation "at risk," the various reform efforts have not yielded improved results overall. The 1990s, however, seem more receptive to a different paradigm of school reform—reinventing public education.*

A reinvented public-education system would welcome diverse strategies and dissimilar schools organized and run by teacher cooperatives, parent associations, private corporations, community-based organizations, and religious institutions. Students and families would be free to match themselves to the schools that suit them best. Such a system will require little bureaucracy and few regulations because it rejects the proposition that schools must be centrally managed according to a single formula.



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The point is to create significant gains in school effectiveness and student achievement, to bring our long-lived educational mediocrity to an end, and to lift our educational attainments to the heights demanded by the information society of the 21st century.

Introduction

Some of the difficulties facing U.S. education reformers arise from the complex, layer-cake structure through which we try to operate our public schools. Others stem from our ethnic and socioeconomic diversity (and vexed history of race relations), and still others from our peculiar sensitivity to church-state relations. But a number of the problems that the United States is trying to solve appear to be widely shared around the industrialized world. These include the following:

√ The obsolescence of a tracked, multitiered school system that still prepares some young people for university and others for blue-collar jobs even though today's high-tech economies require just about everyone to possess considerable knowledge and skill, both academic and practical.

√ The archaic design of the school itself, a nineteenth-century model that pays little attention to modern technology, the changing nature of family and community life, and decades of research into effective organizational and instructional arrangements.

√ The sluggish, stubborn nature of an old, centralized, bureaucratized management structure that sometimes seems to value uniformity and process more than initiative and results.

√ The explosion of knowledge itself, and the many ways in which information is now accessible—not just through books and face-to-face instruction—and the need to "apply" as well as learn it.

√ The tradition of equating "public" schools with government-run schools, a tradition increasingly out of place in an era when government is being restructured and reinvented and many of its services privatized, outsourced, and otherwise transformed.

√ Confusion as to whether the primary beneficiaries of education are its employees or its customers. (Rhetorically, everything is done in the name of the customers, but when it comes to decision-making and political influence, the employees often seem to wield the most power.)

√ The presumption of an irreconcilable tension between the goals of "equality" and "quality," such that more of one is believed to diminish the other.

√ The system's ingrained tendency to judge its performance in terms of inputs and services rather than the actual results it can demonstrate, particularly results defined in terms of student achievement.

√ The dilemma of how best to apportion the decisions legitimately made by public authorities and elected officials, those properly made by parents and those that should be entrusted to professional educators.

√ The need for clear standards, sound assessments, and effective accountability mechanisms in an enterprise historically lacking these.

With these concerns in mind—and you'd find nearly all the same concerns if you were in New Zealand, Germany, or even Taiwan—consider some of the forces now propelling us toward a future of schools that I believe will be profoundly different from those we've known for so long. We can think of these differences as external and internal, the former having to do primarily with governance, finance, corporate structure, power, relationships to government, consumers, and other constituencies, the latter concerning educational variables such as curriculum, standards, pedagogy, class organization, staffing, schedule, calendar, assessment, and technology.

Those two broad categories—internal and external—interact in important ways, of course. Without changed externalities that permit truly different schools—we sometimes call them "break the mold" schools—to come into being, the internal or educational differences are not apt to materialize. But unless serious educational differences actually arise, the agonies of changing structure and governance will scarcely be worth it. The point, after all, is to create significant gains in school

Schools can and should be different from one another rather than identical, and it is reasonable for people to select the school they want, just as they select their home, their health-care provider, their college, their church, their clothes, and their dinner.

effectiveness and student achievement, to bring our long-lived educational mediocrity to an end, and to lift our educational attainments from a level that may have been adequate for the industrial age to the heights demanded by the information society of the 21st century.

Shortcomings of the Current System

What is wrong with the old kind of school and the structure that produced and manages it? Actually, it's doing a decent job today for a tiny fraction of the population, and that has probably always been the case. Once upon a time, such a result may have been sufficient for the sort of society we then were and the economy we then had, but that is no longer true.

We could drown in worrisome data about student achievement, such as the latest National Assessment results, which show that just one-third of all U.S. high-school seniors can read satisfactorily—a quarter of them can scarcely read at all—and only 16 percent are proficient in math. In Colorado, in 1994 just 28 percent of fourth-graders were proficient readers, and 41 percent were "below basic," which means they are essentially unable to read. I think we all know the educational prospects for kids who, halfway through fourth grade, have not really learned to read.

At least since the U.S. was declared "a nation at risk" in 1983, states, localities, and the federal government have been endeavoring to do something about this problem. These would-be solutions have taken many forms, including minimum competency tests that students must pass before graduating from high school; higher standards for teachers, usually involving fairly simple tests they must pass before becoming certified (or hired); the spread of "alternative certification" and other novel ways of bringing people into the classroom; all kinds of new approaches to testing and assessment; state "takeovers" of failing school systems; "merit pay" for teachers; a thousand different prizes and honors for individuals and schools that do an exceptionally good job; myriad business and university partnerships with schools and school systems; innumerable variations on the theme of school restructuring; extended days and year-round schooling; "patented" programs named after such education "gurus" as Theodore Sizer, James Comer, Howard Gardner, and Henry Levin; and lots and lots of experiments with technology.

Thirteen years into this reform movement, however, there is not a lot to show for it by way of improved results. That may be because these changes have not yet had enough time to work; because each reform has been resisted and sometimes rolled back by forces that favor the status quo; or because individual reforms, desirable though they may be, work only on the margins, hence too slowly, or only in schools where certain favorable conditions obtain. Whatever the reason, the consequence has been greater receptivity in the 1990s to a different paradigm of school reform, a more radical one that I call reinventing public education.

New Paradigm for Education Reform

Like a tripod, the new paradigm rests on three conceptual legs.

Leg one is the proposition that the public's proper interest in education is whether and how well children learn, not with how the schools are run, what rules they follow, who works in them, or what their inputs are.

Leg two is the conviction that schools can and should be different from one another rather than identical, and that it is reasonable for people to select the school they want, just as they select their home, their health-care provider, their college, their church, their clothes, and their dinner.

Leg three is the belief—straight out of the theology of reinventing government—that a public school need not be managed by a government agency, staffed by government employees, and regulated by a government bureaucracy. Rather, it is only necessary for the school to be open to the public, paid for by the public, and accountable to a duly constituted public authority for its results.

If you are comfortable with those three propositions, you are probably a reinventer. It also

This reinvention paradigm welcomes decentralized control, entrepreneurial management, and grass-roots initiatives, within a framework of publicly defined standards and accountability. Public officials themselves do not run the schools.

means that you are able to tolerate a high degree of ambiguity, take some risks, endure messy and unpredictable situations, and recognize that there will be surprises.

This reinvention paradigm welcomes decentralized control, entrepreneurial management, and grass-roots initiatives, within a framework of publicly defined standards and accountability. Under this approach, public officials establish standards, make assessments, and hold schools accountable for meeting performance goals, but they themselves do not run the schools. Public officials also retain the power to cancel charters and school-management contracts on grounds of unsatisfactory performance, but they do not directly supervise or control the means by which schools pursue those ends.

The "reinvention" paradigm welcomes diverse strategies and dissimilar schools organized and run by various entities such as teacher cooperatives, parent associations, private corporations, community-based organizations, and religious institutions. It takes for granted that students and families differ and should be free to match themselves to the schools that suit them best. It requires little bureaucracy and few regulations because it rejects the proposition that schools must be centrally managed according to a single formula.

So how different are the schools themselves?

After all, reinventing the education system will be a lot of pointless bother if it results in schools just like those we have today.

Persistence of Traditional Design

The schools we typically have today are not very different in their basic design from the schools we had a century ago. Indeed, it has often been observed that if an extraterrestrial had visited the U.S. in 1896, then gone back to where he came from and returned for another visit in 1996, there are only two major institutions that he would recognize as substantially unchanged: churches and schools. There may be an excuse for the former, but I submit that there is none for the latter.

Our traditional school design is archaic, inefficient, and ineffectual. It does not meet people's or society's needs. It is out of step with the Information Age. Moreover, it fails to take seriously much that we now know about effective organizations and effective education. For example, its 180-day calendar has not changed since we were an agrarian society in which air-conditioning had not been invented and children were needed during the summer to help bring in the crops. Our five- to six-hour school day has not changed, either, despite the fact that Mom has gone to work and isn't waiting at home at 2:45 in the afternoon with cookies and a ride to the scout meeting, music lesson, or pediatrician.

Our schools' technology is still essentially that of the nineteenth century. The typical classroom still does not even have a telephone. There may be an overhead projector, and perhaps an aging computer or two standing alone at the back, but that is about it. The typical lesson today still consists of a large person talking and a lot of smaller people listening, often bored to distraction. This approach is completely out of sync with what we know about effective learning—and with the ways we learn things outside school. The rest of the world has changed, but not our schools.

Incidentally, our private schools are not much different. They follow the same basic design as the public schools, and, in my view, do not even begin to take advantage of their independence and the opportunity it gives them to reshape the basic educational enterprise.

Vision for the Future

It is one thing to create the circumstances within which boldly different schools can come into existence. Charter-school laws are an example of how that can be done; so are open-enrollment and choice laws. Those measures, however, typically work on the demand side. What about supply? What might a different school be like?

We can only think creatively about this if we begin by casting off many of our old assumptions

What if we were to suspend all these things we take for granted and instead ask ourselves what would be the best schools in the world for today's youngsters? What if we were to unleash our imaginations to supply the most creative and practical answers to those questions?

about schools. Let us stop assuming, for example, that schooling is something that begins at age five or six and takes place five to six hours per day for 180 days per year for thirteen years. Let us stop assuming that schools must be organized into grades that correspond to ages such that one moves through them more on the basis of birthdays than achievement.

Let us also stop assuming that the main technology of instruction is a boxy room containing twenty-seven small people and one large person armed with chalk, a few maps, and a shelf of books. Let us stop assuming that learning occurs best in forty- or fifty-minute units, that school content must be divided among the academic disciplines of the university, and that home and school are inherently separate and that we should keep some distance between them. And let us cast aside all the similar assumptions that drive our current-day system as they did yesterday's.

What if we were to suspend all these things we take for granted and instead ask ourselves what would be the best schools in the world for today's youngsters, given their life patterns, their family needs, their career paths, and the nation's current priorities? What if we were to unleash our imaginations to supply the most creative and practical answers to those questions?

That is pretty much what Hudson's Modern Red Schoolhouse and the other New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) design teams were given the liberty and the luxury to do. The same is true of the Edison Project and other comprehensive, start-from-scratch school design projects.

What is crucial to me is that each of these efforts involves rethinking virtually all the essential elements of schooling: goals, standards, performance measures, assessment, the use of time, how one moves from one stage to another, how curriculum is organized and delivered, staffing, training, technology, resource allocation, governance, internal organization, and so on. These school designs do not just change one thing. We know perfectly well how efforts to change one or two things almost always drown in the swamp of other things that have to stay the way they've always been.

Importantly, these newly designed schools are based on research. They can succeed without any significant increase in operating funds. And they are anchored to standards. (At least the models I like are.)

Probably the most important thing about all these designs is that they actually change the elements that previous school reform efforts held constant.

Because of this boldness, not everyone likes them. These reform plans can threaten various vested interests and ingrained habits. This does not refer only to teacher unions, either. They also encounter opposition from parents who don't want to vary their vacation schedule and merchants who are accustomed to getting their teenage workers at 2:45 sharp each day. They also threaten school system bureaucracies, state education departments, and the like.

Not everyone likes bold school reform. But if everyone had to sign off in advance—i.e. if all the so-called stakeholders had to give prior assent to the design—the resulting plan would not be significantly different from the old design.

The good news is that this kind of fundamental reform can be done one school at a time. Indeed, my experience with charter schools, with the Edison Project, and with Hudson Institute's Modern Red Schoolhouse, all suggest that the wisest approach is in fact to undertake this kind of reform one school at a time rather than wholesale. Moreover, it is also wise, wherever practical, to deploy a new design in a new school rather than trying to remake an old one that is set in its ways.

Changing one school at a time is messy. Some also say that it is unjust because it creates different circumstances in Johnny's school than in Sally's. I disagree with that charge. What is truly unjust is to confine as many children as we do today to mediocre old-style schools.

Conclusion

These issues will not be resolved without arguments, and some of them will be quite contentious. I should note, however, that the type of change I have described here—the school-by-school approach to school reform— can move forward without widespread public debate. And in doing so we can create a stronger argument for reform, by showing how effective it can be.

In summary, it is important to recognize a few things about school reform.

The nation *is* at risk because our children are receiving such poor education. Incrementalism cannot fix our education system, because too many things have changed while it has remained largely the same. Only bold, fundamental changes can do the trick. Thus it is time for a new paradigm of school reform that is not incrementalist, top-down, or uniform.

The old school design is woefully obsolete. The era in which we live demands a very different concept of education and how to deliver it. New school designs—note the use of the plural noun—have to change just about everything we have taken for granted about the old design.

The kind of change described here creates a significant number of enemies, but the fight is worth the effort. Our foes after all, are the vested interests that are short-changing our children and grandchildren. We can make it easier to win those battles by working for new legal arrangements, such as charter school laws, that redefine what we mean by public schooling.

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